

# Everyday Politics in Restoration Period Japan

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## **Introduction**

During the Restoration years — between the 1850s and early 1870s — villagers in the province of Shimotsuke were active politicians: they fought for their autonomy, they manufactured new ideologies, and they devised effective political practices to achieve results. Similar to people in rural areas throughout Japan, they contested individual and village tax burdens; challenged corruption and the quality of governance; initiated petitions to lower prices and to alleviate debts; protested what they deemed unfair extractions of labor and poor pay for services; and carried out campaigns for village office. Sometimes they engaged in violence, but rioting was the exception; on an everyday basis, their more mundane political skills were put to the test.

These were of course the years in which the system that had governed Japan for two and a half centuries came under attack. The story of the abrupt decline of the samurai has been well documented. The opening of Japan in 1853 inaugurated an era of political and economic crisis. A shogunal succession dispute was followed by assassination of Tokugawa leaders, attempts at subjugation of rebel domains, the politicization of the court in Kyoto, civil war, and eventually the capitulation of Edo to a new imperial regime. The Meiji government, inaugurated in 1868, proceeded to transform the political make-up of Japan. The story of the commoners during these turbulent times, men and women outside of the elite samurai circles, is less understood. In a previous essay I tried to show how “commoners” in Edo experienced — survived — the Restoration. Here I am interested in the everyday politics of farmers, of large and small holders alike, who drew upon their own world views in an attempt to preserve and even enhance the integrity of their communities at a time when a new centralized state was being formed.

In contrast to previous work on late Tokugawa rural unrest, I am interested in day to day struggles and a multitude of tactics ranging from revolt, compromise, to quiescence. While the attempt to link commoner unrest with the long process of state formation and, in particular, the revolutionary deeds of 1868 is both valid and important, I am less concerned with the responses people in the countryside had to “national” events (and even less concerned to demonstrate commoner input into the Restoration) than with what may be called a locally-generated agenda. To be sure there are links between periphery and center, between local knowledge and the “big picture” which must be explored, but I am more interested in the defiant actions of farmers and other

country folk who, sometimes in concert with, but often independent of the movement which led to the Meiji Restoration, sought to defend local values and local autonomy.

Three examples of everyday politics have been chosen from Shimotsuke Province, an area which roughly corresponds to present-day Tochigi Prefecture. The region was close enough to Edo for farmers to keep abreast of “national” politics; it was poor enough for them to suffer immediately from natural or man-made problems in the economy. In all three episodes, countrymen acted with confidence in the pursuit of an agenda which they themselves had set. They spoke out against exploitation and unjust treatment and often took their cues from the Restoration drama unfolding before them. The first incident began in the early 1860s. Konaka villagers and their colleagues charged their hatamoto overlords, the Rokkaku family, with corruption and misuse of tax moneys. They appealed to the bakufu and after its collapse, the farmers stubbornly took their claims to the new imperial government. The second incident concerns smallholders in the Kanuma district who voiced their anger against members of the village elite when they failed to offer economic relief in the year of supreme chaos, 1868. They demanded social rectification (*yonaoshi*) and modeling their behavior on the imperial army that had swept through their lands, used threats of force in an attempt to bring about renovation at the village level. A third episode of everyday politics took place in the Nasu region in the years immediately following the Restoration. Farmers initiated legal proceedings against their hatamoto masters in order to reap the benefits they expected from the new regime. When that avenue was blocked, they resorted to violence which was quickly suppressed. They succeeded, however, in creating their own memory of the Meiji Restoration which continued to inform their political activism into the 20th century.

### **The Rokkaku Affair**

The Rokkaku Affair illustrates the ability and willingness of farmers to “speak out” in defense of established institutions of self government. The incident involved the young Tanaka Shoōzō, village headman in the 1860s, local activist for “people’s rights” in the 1870s, elected member to the Tochigi Prefectural Assembly in the 1880s and to the National Diet in the 1890s, and then famous throughout Japan in the early 20th century for his struggle against the pollution of the Ashio Copper Mine.<sup>1)</sup> It highlights continuities between bakumatsu commoner political behavior and the People’s Rights Movement in the Meiji period.

In their dispute with the Rokkaku family, the hatamoto family fief holders of Konaka village and six other neighboring villages, farmers drew up petitions and devised various strategies to protect their autonomy. They complained of corruption in high office and demanded accountability in the use of their tax moneys. And when the Rokkaku family failed to listen, they appealed to higher authority, first the bakufu, then after its demise, to the imperial forces.<sup>2)</sup>

The Rokkaku were a hatamoto family with holdings in southwestern Shimotsuke, near the present-day city of Sano. Their lands were valued at 2,655 *koku*.<sup>3)</sup> They were

one of the twenty so-called “high families” (*koke*); their holdings were considerably less than 10,000 *koku*, but they sat with the daimyo at the Shogun’s court because of their lineage linking them with the Kyoto nobility. Their expertise in ceremonials meant that the *koke* often served as messengers between Edo and Kyoto.

Land holdings, especially in Shimotsuke and other areas close to Edo, were typically a patchwork of bakufu, daimyo, hatamoto, and temple holdings. In the Sano area, for example, the Rokkaku were one of 46 hatamoto in the immediate vicinity, many sharing tax revenues from individual villages. The Rokkaku family derived income from six villages, but only in Konaka village did it claim jurisdiction over more than half of the harvest.

This highly fragmented pattern of land holding encouraged a certain level of village self government in the Kanto region and Shimotsuke in particular. Village headmen (*nanushi*), often multiple in number (“parts” of villages under different jurisdictions necessarily maintained their own administrative framework, including headmen and elders) were by custom elected by village vote (*irefuda*), and village leagues in turn elected their own group headman (*warimoto nanushi*). In the case of the six Rokkaku village, the *warimoto* was given permission to wear swords and bear a surname. He oversaw the functioning of the six headmen and was especially concerned to ensure prompt and exact payment of taxes due. As a middleman, he was often caught between conflicting obligations to the Rokkaku family in Edo and local village society.<sup>4)</sup>

The Rokkaku family, like many other small fief holders, began to suffer financial difficulties from the early part of the 19th century. In 1818 the family required Imafuku village to submit its tax (in cash) early, before the harvest, forcing the village to borrow 50 *ryo* at 15 percent interest. Other requests for early tax payments and straightforward financial contributions (*goyokin*) followed with some regularity.<sup>5)</sup> Villagers, citing their own financial problems, were reluctant to conform to this practice. By the 1860s, as we shall see, the six village league not only refused to pay the taxes ahead of time, but cited rumors of corruption in the Edo residence of their hatamoto overlords and urged reform: personnel changes, financial retrenchment, and moral regeneration. This increasing willingness of countrymen to “speak out” is essential background for the Rokkaku Affair.

In 1857, Rokkaku administrators summoned the headmen of Imafuku, Tajima, Sukedo, and Yamakawa villages and other officials, including representatives of the smallholders (*komae*), to Konaka village. They were informed, with no prior consultation, that the village headman of Konaka village, Tanaka Tomizo, was to be appointed to the position of group headman (*warimoto nanushi*). The promotion was a reward for Tanaka’s highly successful efforts in collecting and managing money. Tomizo had managed to gather some 5,000 *ryo*, more than double the hatamoto family’s usual tax income. His promotion immediately caused problems. Until then the position of group headman had rotated among the six villages, changing every year. In 1857, Kobayashi Tsujishichiro of Yamakawa village would have normally

taken up the post. Villagers, large and small holders alike, complained about the break with established custom.

At the same time the villages were told of another unsettling decision. In the meeting, Shōtei of Okubo village was recognized as a member of the village office holding class (*mura yakunin*) and given responsibility to manage the accounts of the various Rokkaku villages. The people were shocked. Shōtei, awarded the surname Hiratsuka, was an educated man. He was a trained physician — but he was a smallholder, a *komae*, with no previous experience in office holding. In a letter of protest to the Rokkaku family, the four village headman said they would endure Tomizo's appointment provided that it was seen as an exception to the normal practice of village rotation. As to Shōtei, however, the headman, supported by the smallholders in their villages, demanded his immediate removal. The Edo office refused to listen.

In the years that followed tension slowly mounted between the villagers and their hatamoto superiors. Tomizo's son, Shōzō, at the age of 17 was elected to replace his father as a headman of Konaka village. He worked hard to improve educational opportunities for village children and encouraged local industry. Shōzō and his father often worked in concert with Chief Steward Sakata Tomoemon in an attempt to restore the economic health of the House of Rokkaku. In 1862, however, Sakata died and was replaced by Hayashi Saburobei, a schemer, manipulator, and if unsympathetic accounts are to be believed, corrupt to the core. Hayashi immediately set about to "reform" fief administration, with moves designed more to enhance his own power and wealth. He ordered a series of personnel changes in the command structure of the various Rokkaku holdings. Villagers immediately charged that the directives were both arbitrary and autocratic. Hayashi had chosen to ignore village practices of electing their own officials and the men he put into office were not popular choices.

Hayashi also had plans to rebuild the Edo residence of the Rokkaku family, in preparation for the eventual marriage of the Rokkaku heir, the young Chikara. As Chief Steward he could reasonably hope to profit from the construction project. This scheme drew Hayashi and Tomizo into direct confrontation. Tomizo, as group headman, feared that the building expenses would undo his efforts, over the previous three years, to build up financial reserves. The farmers would suffer from tax levies that would be necessary to pay for the extravaganza. Tomizo submitted a petition and was able to argue with success the times were not right.

In 1863, Hayashi tried once again to initiate construction on a new residence, taking advantage of the absence of the lord and Tomizo, who were both in Nara to prepare for the Shogun's ceremonial visit to the supposed tomb of Emperor Jimmu. To pay for the construction Hayashi demanded prepayment of taxes to the amount of 2,000 *koku*, much to the consternation of the villagers.

The two village headmen of Konaka, Kensaburo and Tanaka Shōzō, immediately sent a letter of protest to the lord at his temporary Kansai address. Shōzō, twenty-two years old at the time and, in his father's absence, acting group headman as well, hinted

broadly that Hayashi should be dismissed. He had willfully ignored his lord's instructions and as to questions of village administration, Hayashi had trampled on tradition, issued cruel laws, and engaged in bribery.<sup>6)</sup> Shoō's use of unvarnished language was sufficiently shocking that the lord chose to have the village headmen dismissed instead of the offending Hayashi.

The injustice of their dismissal was too blatant for people in the six villages to overlook. Repeated petitions and threats to march on the Edo residence forced the Rokkaku to change their mind. By the end of 1863 Kensaburo and Shoō were re-installed to their office as headmen, although rumors of corruption associated with Hayashi and his cohorts continued. The villagers, with Tanaka Shoō at their lead, sought some means to remove Hayashi from power.

In the meanwhile, by 1866, Hayashi managed to promote Hiratsuka Shohei not only to the influential position of personal physician to the lord, but to a new office, Deputy of Lands (*jikata toriatsukai*), a position superior to group headman and which in effect gave Shohei control over village affairs. Tomizo and Yasubei, the two group headmen, resigned their office in protest.

Famine conditions in 1866 only added to a sense of suffering. However, while it was clear that farmers in other parts of the Kanto region had resorted to rioting, the Rokkaku villagers chose to continue to pursue peaceful means of protest. In the Fourth month of 1867 the six village headmen, including Tanaka Shoō, submitted their resignations in masse. They drew up a manifesto (*giteisho*) in which the headmen pledged to act together in concert. Next they submitted an appeal to the Rokkaku lord complaining of corruption and injustice and calling for the resignation of Shohei as Deputy of Lands. Hayashi attempted to have the matter dropped, but the village leaders persisted and submitted another signed petition, this time setting their sights on Hayashi as well. The document charged Shohei and Hayashi with eight areas of misgovernment, including avarice, bribery, misuse of funds, arbitrary appointments and dismissals, and unjust, selfish behavior in specific cases noted over a span of seven years.<sup>7)</sup>

When the Rokkaku failed to respond to these grievances, farmers sought redress from higher authority. On the one hand petitions were sent off to the Karasumaru family in Kyoto in the hope that the main family would have some influence over its branches. At the same time attempts were made to approach the bakufu. Finally, on the 7th day of the Twelfth month, 1867, a preliminary presentation was made to Senior Councilors in Edo. Two days later Satsuma and Choōshū troops carried out a coup d'état which restored imperial rule (*osei fukko*). Decrees were issued which abolished the bakufu; needless to say, the charges against the Rokkaku family were shelved. Hayashi used the period of confusion to seek his revenge; in the First month of 1868 he had Tanaka Shoō arrested and imprisoned in a small cell in the compound of the Rokkaku in Edo.

Still the Rokkaku countrymen did not give up. After the defeat of Tokugawa forces in battles at Toba and Fushimi early in the First month of 1868, Tokugawa

Yoshinobu, the last Shogun, returned to Edo and quickly announced his intention to surrender to the forces of the Emperor. Three Divisions of the Imperial Army marched on Edo, arriving there in the middle of the Third month and occupying Edo Castle on the 11th day of the Fourth month. The old central government had collapsed, and along with it disappeared institutions of law and order in the countryside. The spring of 1868 was characterized by another wave of rural disturbances. But Konaka and the other Rokkaku villages chose to continue attempts at practical political maneuvering. When, at the end of the Third month, forces of the Tošando Imperial Army were in the vicinity, village representatives went out, armed with a signed petition, to lay their case before the new regime.

The Imperial Army had recently established an office aiming at “educating and pacifying the people,” and it was this office that agreed to pursue an investigation of the Rokkaku affair. The judgment took time. Finally, in the Eleventh month, about the same time the boy emperor had taken up residence in new eastern capital, Tokyo, a sentence was pronounced: Hayashi and Hiratsuka were purged from public employment; the lord of the Rokkaku family was forced to abdicate; and Tanaka Shožō was ordered released from imprisonment. He had been locked up for ten months, and knew nothing of the Meiji Restoration, let alone his villagers’ victory, until freed at the end of 1868.

### **Demands for Social Justice in the Kanuma Region**

A series of rural disturbances took place in Shimotsuke during the very time the regime in Edo was disintegrating — the spring of 1868. During these chaotic months, villagers were temporarily free from their political overlords. Bands of guerrilla soldiers, most of them Tokugawa men who refused to submit to imperial orders, roved the countryside. In like manner the troops of imperial army chased them here and there. Most daimyo choose to join the new government, but others chose to fight, especially those from the domains in northeastern Japan.

Commoners in rural areas were quick to take advantage of the loss of control from above. Their watchword was *yonaoshi*, the desire and often the demand for social justice, economic leveling, and political freedoms, implying independence from political and social restraints imposed from above. Villagers, admittedly not everywhere, but in the Kanto region, attempted to depart from established power hierarchies, both within and without. In many cases they organized farmer militias, seeking to protect themselves not only from bandits and ronin, but in some instances liberate themselves from agents of central authority.

The number of rural uprisings swelled both in 1866 and 1868. Late Tokugawa *yonaoshi* uprisings in particular have been subject to much study.<sup>8)</sup> However, while many farmers did in fact fight to rectify what they saw as social injustice, many more took advantage of non-violent means with the same goals in mind: equalization of power and wealth, at least within rural society. Commoners possessed a fund of political skills with which they could challenge and transform society. At the same



time Katsu Kaishū and Saigō Takamori were carrying out their negotiations in giving birth to a new national order, farmers in Shimotsuke and elsewhere were involved in a complex web of negotiations, hoping to bring about a new order at the village level.

On the 8th day of the Third month, 1868, a group of men loyal to the former Shogun opened fire on a detachment of the Tōshandō Imperial Army as it camped along the Reihaishi Kaidō near Shibata Post Station not far from Ashikaga. This was one of the first engagements of a civil war that would continue into the spring of 1869. The imperial troops were outnumbered and outclassed in weaponry. Still they managed to inflict major injuries upon the enemy; after four hours of bloody fighting the Tokugawa men were in flight with over 100 casualties.

The battle was decisive in a number of ways. Many of the Kanto daimyo who had not previously committed themselves to the Kyoto regime found it convenient to publicize their imperial loyalties. To local people there was also a lesson learned. Outbursts against the village rich and powerful could be rationalized as scaled-down versions of the struggle between the imperial forces and the old Tokugawa regime. Both aimed at *yonaoshi*, one writ large, the other small. Immediately after the battle at Shibata a series of *yonaoshi* uprisings rocked the Kanto countryside. And often on the lips of the rioting farmers was the phrase: "Following the example of the Imperial Army, we should attack the establishments of the wealthy."<sup>9)</sup> In village after village farmers erected banners which proclaimed *YONAOSHI!* Mobs armed with farm implements were easily moved to carry out threats they had made to destroy the property of wealthy merchants and pawn brokers and others unsympathetic to the plight of the poor.

In Shimotsuke, the first of the *yonaoshi* uprisings took place on the 29th day of the Third month in Yasutsuka village near the Susumenomiya Post Station south of Utsunomiya. Outbursts followed in quick succession along the trunk roads, first to the north reaching the castletown of Utsunomiya by the 3rd day of the Fourth month, and then west towards the Kanuma area where raids on the village rich began on the 5th day of the Fourth month. A separate explosion of rural violence was sparked in the Mooka area on the 4th day of the Fourth month which spread northward along the eastern side of the Kinukawa River.<sup>10)</sup>

Popular mobilization proceeded rapidly, usually by word of mouth, but sometimes by circular. In the Kanuma region, for example, circulars were sent out in all directions proclaiming: "Since it is now the time to assist the impoverished and initiate social rectification (*yonaoshi*), once this circular is received, villagers in great number should assemble immediately."<sup>11)</sup> The numbers were in fact impressive. At the beginning of the Fourth month there were between three hundred and seven hundred protesters, but by the 5th and 6th day, when the rioting reached a peak, there were reports of some three thousand to five thousand farmers on the march.<sup>12)</sup>

The uprisings generally reflected a real sense of economic deprivation among the lower levels of village society. Sharp increases in the price of rice, wheat, sake and other daily-life commodities forced many smallholders to seek out the pawn shop.

Moreover, there were heavy labor demands upon villagers living close to major highways. This was especially true in the early months of 1868 when many daimyo and hatamoto left Edo for their domains in the Kanto and Tohoku regions. These extra demands on porters and local labor were exacerbated when the Imperial Army arrived in the area; it too required labor for transport and in some cases conscripted locals for front line duty.

Farmers wanted lower prices and a lighter work load; they wanted a more equal distribution of wealth and they wanted fair treatment. This meant that there were obvious targets deserving of punishment: the rich merchants and distribution agents at the post stations, the pawn brokers, the porter and pack-horse operators, and the village officeholders. Methodically, the wealthy and powerful members of society were confronted with demands for grain and gold and the return of pawned items. And if they failed to respond favorably their property was subject to destruction (*uchikowashi*).

The threats were effective. In village after village the elite drew up letters of promise, specifying contributions of money and grain and promising to return pawned items and property. For example, on the 2nd day of the Fourth month, the smallholders of Izumi village, near Kanuma, forced village officials to agree to the lowering of interest rates on pawned items to the level of the Tenpō period. They also won relaxations in loan repayments for those lacking funds to purchase food or fertilizer. On the 4th, in Same, and on the 5th in Ōwada, village officials gave in to the demands of the farmers and submitted letters of promise.<sup>13)</sup> The agreement signed between the two parties generally concluded with threats that the farmers would rise up again if the promises were not kept.

The political skills of the rural commoners can be shown by looking closely at events unfolding in Shimo Nanma and neighboring villages along the course of the Ōashikawa River to the southwest of Kanuma. Shimo Nanma was a small village composed, in the 1860s, of 82 households and some 405 men, women, and children — and 46 horses. It was located on well-watered high land good for the growing of rice. The entire 641 *koku* yield of the village was part of the domain of the hatamoto house of Hatakeyama Kikuma. Nearby villages which together formed a five-village league included Same (304 *koku*, also part of the Hatakeyama Kikuma domain), Kami Nanma (1,193 *koku* divided among eight fief holders), Aburaden (680 *koku* divided among four fief holders), and Nishizawa (1,015 *koku* divided among four fief holders). The acting headman of Shimo Nanma, Hei'emon, kept diaries covering the early months of 1868 which scholars have used to show how the village, from the viewpoint of the elite, responded to the *yonaoshi* spirit of the times.<sup>14)</sup>

The entry for the 6th day of the Fourth month reported that an assembly of farmers from the three villages of Shimo Nanma, Aburaden, and Same was scheduled for the 7th at Shōganji Temple in Shimo Nanma. The diary also referred to episodes of rioting in nearby villages. On the 5th, the post station at Kanuma, 1.5 *ri* to the north of Shimo Nanma, had been the scene of incidents of property destruction, followed by a



brief “battle” between troops dispatched from the Utsunomiya domain and rioting farmers. Some Shimo Nanma locals were reported to have been conscripted into the mob. Hei’emon and other Shimo Nanma village officials were obviously concerned.

On the 7th, thirteen villagers, including Denji, a farmer with holdings valued at 7.336 *koku* and elected representative (*hyakusho-dai*) of the smallholders, met as scheduled to discuss means to obtain economic assistance. The men decided to press for the return of items and land in pawn and other promissory notes.

Hei’emon’s diary entry for the 7th also included a copy of an urgent circular which had arrived from the Niregi post station, about 1 *ri* to the southeast of Shimo Nanma. Niregi had as early as the 3rd day of the Fourth month been hit by *uchikowashi* bands. The circular noted that there were large numbers of impoverished people camped in the vicinity and that an eruption of violence was imminent. Discussion over ways to deal with their poverty was needed. Villages were told to dispatch one or two representatives to Niregi Post Station to attend an emergency meeting on the 8th.

The Shimo Nanma officials chose to send Yagoemon, a group headman (*kumigashira-dai*) and with holdings valued at 20.976 *koku*, one of the richest men in the village, to serve as their representative. He returned on the 9th with a copy of a manifesto which urged the provision of relief to the poor as the best means to ward off the possibility of property destruction by gangs of homeless and untrustworthy men. The manifesto was signed by officials of 20 villages.

In the meantime, on the night of the 7th, the actions of a group of masterless samurai traveling through the area caused Shimo Nanma officials to call out every man and woman to defend the village. Officials in two neighboring villages did the same. In the end there was no real danger, but aware of their vulnerability and of the need for cooperation, officials from four villages quickly met and drew up a sort of mutual defense pact which included a detailed list of procedures to follow in the case of attack.<sup>15)</sup>

On the 12th day the village officials met to discuss reports of the situation in Nishizawa where the smallholders were threatening to resort to force if their demands for economic relief were not met. By the 14th the Shimo Nanma village elite themselves were under attack. The entry for that day read: “On the night of the 14th day of the Fourth month there were reports of an assembly held at Hozenji Temple; on the 15th the [smallholders] went to the Aoryuśan Shrine where they shouted out in loud voices and created an uproar. Kakuemon and Hei’emon came and told them to withdraw back to Hozenji temple.”<sup>16)</sup> Later that night Denji and two other representatives reported that the smallholders had decided not to riot. Over the next two days they carried out a series of negotiations with members of the village elite, holding over them the threat of rioting if their demands were not met.

Representatives of the Imperial Forces in charge of pacification of rural unrest had issued a circular to village officials in the Kanuma area urging compromise. On the 17th the Shimo Nanma elite agreed to sign a document granting a number of concessions, ostensibly as a means to rescue the poor, but in fact as a means to forestall

rioting. According to the agreement:

1. All items in pawn were to be returned; repayment, in installments over five years, was to begin on the 20th day of the Tenth month, with no interest charged.
2. All promissory notes were to be repaid in installments over three years, with no interest charged.
3. Other debts to be repaid in installments over four years, with no interest charged.
4. All lands in pawn were to be returned; repayments were to be made in installments over 10 years, with no interest charged.<sup>17)</sup>

Seemingly a peaceful solution had been reached; but included in the agreement was a clause stating that if the terms were not fulfilled, violence would ensue.

An uneasy truce held for the next ten days. Then on the 27th the smallholders in Shimo Nanma charged that village officials had failed to live up to their promises and once again threatened violence. Similar movements were underway in three neighboring villages. Assemblies of impoverished farmers were held at Hozenji temple in Shimo Nanma on the 27th and the 28th. Denji and seven other representatives of the smallholders presented village officials with demands for conditions similar to what they supposed had already been won in the near-by village of Kami Nanma. They demanded that the rich give to the poor. Specifically cash and rice contributions were expected as follows:

Joemon	rice 50 bags, cash 50 <i>ryo</i> <sup>-</sup>
Hashimoto (Koōzō)	rice 50 bags, cash 40 <i>ryo</i> <sup>-</sup>
Yagoemon	rice 50 bags, cash 50 <i>ryo</i> <sup>-</sup>
Hei'emon	rice 20 bags, cash 25 <i>ryo</i> <sup>-</sup>
Kakuyemon	rice 20 bags, cash 20 <i>ryo</i> <sup>-</sup>

Moreover, the smallholders upped their earlier demands regarding the repayment for items in pawn and other debts. They were willing to repay only half of the original debt and wanted to re-negotiate the terms for repayment of any remaining moneys.

This demand initiated a sort of bargaining session. The five wealthy villagers who had been singled out came up with a compromise offer: each would offer 25 bags of rice and 15 *ryo*<sup>-</sup> in cash. The *komae* refused, and mediators proposed that each man donate 30 bags of rice and 30 *ryo*<sup>-</sup> in cash. More meetings were held and on the 2nd day of the intercalary Fourth month, five men representing the smallholders continued to press their demands on the wealthy members of their community. Their new bargaining position was stated as follows:

Joemon	rice 50 bags, cash 50 <i>ryo</i> <sup>-</sup>
Hei'emon	rice 20 bags, cash 25 <i>ryo</i> <sup>-</sup>
Yagoemon	rice 40 bags, cash 40 <i>ryo</i> <sup>-</sup>
Kakueemon	rice 15 bags, cash 15 <i>ryo</i> <sup>-</sup>
Koōzō <sup>-</sup>	rice 30 bags, cash 30 <i>ryo</i> <sup>-</sup>

Once again the five men of wealth met to come up with a counter offer: they told mediators that they would donate 100 bags of rice and 100 *ryo* in total, but by this time the smallholders had raised the stakes even further, demanding that various loan and pawn documents be destroyed. In the end, the negotiations broke down as suspicions on both sides served to frustrate any attempt to reach a peaceful settlement.<sup>18)</sup>

At early dawn on the 3rd day of the intercalary Fourth month all of the smallholders of the village gathered in front of the headman's house to voice their anger. They withdrew their earlier offers and left notice of their intention to tear the whole village apart and proceed to press their demands on the Tochigi Post Station. On the 4th, Hei'emon, the headman, and other village officials set off for the post station to inform higher authorities of the disturbance. They returned on the 5th, but the village was still empty. Later in the day the smallholders returned; they had found little sympathy with their cause. The countryside was quiet.

Some hard-line members of the *komae* wanted to continue the struggle, but it had become clear that the *yonaooshi* dream had ended. Both the village elite and the smallholders seemed resigned to accept the judgment of higher authority from outside. In the Seventh month officials at the post station issued their pronouncement: four men were singled out for excesses in their disrespect to their superiors; the smallholders as a whole were urged to concentrate their energies on agricultural activities.

The Shimo Nanma villagers and their comrades in the Kanto area failed in their attempt to "rectify society." They failed to realize more representation in village councils; they failed to bring corrupt officials to justice; they even failed to lighten the work load on the highways. But some benefits did accrue. Commodity prices did go down, if only temporarily, and smallholders were relatively successful in gaining moratoriums and reductions in the repayments of their debts — which for many was the aim of *yonaooshi* in any case.

Aside from considerations of success or failure, what is interesting about the 1868 attempts at *yonaooshi* is the obvious political sophistication of the smallholders. The disturbances were hardly spontaneous. They were highly organized and took advantage of a tradition of bargaining techniques designed to give leverage in dealings with political and social superiors. Shimo-Namma villagers, for example, had a long history of struggle against the often corrupt privileges of wealth and power.<sup>19)</sup> In 1741 the smallholders rose up against village officials and succeeded in reducing the village headman's tax exemption amount from 45 *koku* to 20 *koku*. Another disturbance in 1836 was over the calculation of the land tax. The problem lasted over three years; in 1838 the smallholders succeeded in delivering a petition to one of the senior councilors of the Tokugawa regime in Edo. By throwing it into his palanquin they were successful in obtaining Tokugawa intervention on their behalf. Another clash between the villagers and their governors took place in 1863. In all cases, the smallholders were able to use threats of violence on the one hand, and deft skills at collective bargaining on the other, in attempts to defy their superiors and maximize

their own interests.

### **The Nasu Incident**

A third episode relates to an instance of rural political action which took place in the Nasu region in the eastern part of Shimotsuke between the years 1869 and 1871. The Meiji Restoration failed to improve immediately the lot of the majority of the Japanese people. Commodity prices remained high; drought conditions persisted. The costs of civil war, both in terms of economic and political security, were great. The Nasu incident is indicative of the number of popular disturbances that continued unabated into the early years of the new regime.

What took place in Nasu, at that time part of Nikko Prefecture, was in line with a long tradition of commoner protest in the region. The incident involved a league of 26 villages attached to the Karasuyama domain. From the late 17th century, despite the fact that the area was dominated by dry fields, the village league was required to submit its taxes in kind. This meant, in effect, that the league was forced to buy rice in order to pay its taxes. A second league of 24 villages, also part of the Karasuyama domain, had traditionally paid taxes in cash. Repeatedly the league of 26 villages requested permission to likewise pay its taxes in cash; repeatedly the domain refused.<sup>20)</sup>

Beginning in the late 1850s, rapid rises in commodity prices, especially the price of rice, aggravated the situation. Members of the league of 26 villages complained of economic deprivation; they argued that their taxes were in effect eight times greater than their neighbors who were allowed to pay their taxes in cash. Famine conditions in 1866 and 1867 had critically weakened their economic base. Moreover, in 1868 the Karasuyama domain conscripted workers from their fields to assist the imperial cause. To these embattled farmers the Meiji Restoration meant little; reduced manpower and continued poor weather only seemed to make things worse.

On the Tenth month of 1869, the village headmen of the 26 villages met at the Tomoeiya inn at Sakanushi village to draw up a petition to the domain's Office of Civil Affairs requesting, once again, permission to pay taxes in cash. The village headmen vowed to remain united until their cause was successfully concluded.

Karasuyama domain authorities immediately rejected the petition, causing much consternation in the village league, especially among the smallholders. These men refused to accept defeat; they held assemblies, elected representatives, and decided that more force was needed if they were to obtain justice. In the Eleventh month, led by Tatsusaburo of Miyahara village, six smallholders traveled to Tokyo to submit a direct appeal to the tax bureau of the Ministry of Finance. They acted, according to one document, "for the sake of the people in all the villages whose distress we could not longer bear to witness."<sup>21)</sup>

While the six representatives were in Tokyo, in Nasu, villagers came together in mass demonstrations demanding changes in the method of computing their taxes. The domain was pressured into seeking compromise: it offered to allow the league to pay

its taxes at 60 percent of the market value of rice, set for that year at 3 to 8 *shō* per *ryo*<sup>-</sup> and also promised to make full conversion to a cash-based tax system in two years.

The ensuing calm was short lived. By the end of the Eleventh month villagers decided that the domain was not acting in good faith and determined to fight for a more fair and permanent solution to the problem. Popular assemblies elected a new set of representatives led by Itabashi Sei'emon from Ōsawa village and Tsuchida Kurazo<sup>-</sup> from Mukada village. Sei'emon was a smallholder with barely two *koku* of agricultural income to his name; he was, according to later laudatory accounts, not only wise and benevolent, but stubborn and supremely motivated to "challenge the strong and aid the weak."<sup>22)</sup> As we will see, he did in fact prove an able defender of the interests of the poorer members of his community.

On the first day of the Twelfth month of 1869 the representatives left for Tokyo and immediately proceeded to submit a petition to the Ministry of Popular Affairs (Minbusho). Beginning in the First month of 1870, Sei'emon took the case to the Tokyo Police Authorities, charging that the Karasuyama domain was acting contrary to the new law of the land. Three months of intense interrogations followed. Sei'emon repeatedly sought central government intervention on behalf of the defiant villagers he represented. In testimony he expressed his expectations of the promises of the new government to get rid of the evil practices of the past and come to the rescue of the people. Indeed, the expectation of such changes had given him the courage to bring the villagers' case before the police. By the end of the Second month, Sei'emon and his comrades were confident of victory and drank cups of wine in celebration.

In the meanwhile, agents of Karasuyama domain were at work both to harass and discredit the credibility of the village delegation. By the Third month they managed to exert their influence over the police. Unexpectedly, Sei'emon and other village representatives were summoned to police headquarters and all paperwork relating to the case was returned. Stunned, Sei'emon protested, but the police maintained that prices in general had risen, and thus the villagers had no reason to complain.

Sei'emon and the other representatives were determined not to give up. They returned to Nasu and initiated a round of negotiations with domain authorities at Karasuyama. Again, Sei'emon assumed the lead, but his willingness to bargain with domain officials did not meet with the favor of all the smallholders. Seisai, from Ōoke village, began to pressure Sei'emon to be more forceful in his dealing with the domain. The hard-liners argued against the negotiations; they drew up petitions to send to the daimyo of Satsuma, Choōshū, and Tosa, and then urged a call to arms. Over Sei'emon protests but ultimately with his consent, late in the Third month of 1870 Seisai and an army of over two hundred angry farmers set out on a march on Tokyo, hoping to stir unrest at home and put pressure on the new government.

The villagers' army was easily put down by Utsunomiya domain troops when it neared Utsunomiya. Nonetheless the encounter did make Karasuyama officers see the need to bring the Nasu incident to a quick conclusion. On the 17th day of the Fourth month, village officials from the league of 26 villages were invited to the negotiating

table. Two months later, on the 16th day of the Sixth month, the village headmen agreed to a compromise settlement: taxes were to be submitted at a set rate of 1 *to* 5 *sho* for the next five years, during which time tax reform was promised. The domain asked and received signatures of agreement to this solution from both the village elite and the smallholders, thus bringing the incident to a close.

A few days later, on the 27th, Sei'emon and other leaders of the delegation which had pleaded the villagers' case in Tokyo and continued resistance activities upon returning to Nasu, were arrested and imprisoned by the Karasuyama authorities. A trial ensued and in the Sixth month of 1871 Sei'emon was found guilty of inciting rebellion; he and two others were sentenced to seven years of enforced labor. Sei'emon maintained his faith that his efforts on behalf of his fellow smallholders would not be in vain. In verse, while he awaited word of his sentence, he wrote: "Spring rains melt the ice; the source of a mighty river." In another poem he looked forward to the promise of a new age of enlightenment.<sup>23)</sup>

Country folk in Nasu and in other parts of Japan were willing to challenge higher authorities and speak out on behalf of just and fair treatment. They were not always successful, but their efforts often resulted in the creation of local traditions of political protest and contestation. In many ways, the immediate results of these political contests may be less important than the way in which they were remembered by the people involved.

During the Meiji years, Sei'emon was gradually transformed into a local hero celebrated for his personal sacrifice on behalf of his fellow villagers. The village celebrated his return home in 1878, and by the end of the Meiji period his comrades compared him favorably with the great rural martyr Sakura Sogoro. In 1902, nearly 30 years after the incident, a stone was erected in Ōsawa village to commemorate the ultimate victory of the voice of the people. "Heaven may temporarily lose out to man, but in the end Heaven (the people) will prove triumphant."<sup>24)</sup> Eight years later another monument was unveiled in the grounds of the local Hachiman shrine on which the names of all participants in the Nasu incident, headed by Sei'emon, were engraved in stone. And in 1912 a long narrative of the struggle was recorded in the form of an interview with the 80 year-old Sei'emon. Clearly the years of struggle had become part of the mental heritage of the Nasu commoners. Such episodes of rural resistance were not flashes in the pan; they left a legacy which could and did serve as the basis for political activity, sometimes radical defiance of central authority, and sometimes more conservative preservation of "local spirit."<sup>25)</sup> In Nasu, Sei'emon had come to symbolize the ability of the people to take matters into their own hands and speak out in defense of their own well-being.

## Conclusion

The Meiji Restoration may be seen as part of a long process — a "dialectic of cultural struggle" — in which popular or subordinate groups confront and conform to the rituals and forms of rule of the state. In looking at this process of state formation



and the input of commoners, Phillip Corrigan and Derek Sayer's processual analysis of English state formation offers many interesting hints.<sup>26)</sup> They define state formation as a cultural revolution "in the way the world is made sense of," and they take as their leitmotiv "the mutuality between consensus and coercion."<sup>27)</sup> In other words, the state, what Corrigan and Sayer term "the great arch," is constantly being formed and reformed in a on-going relationship with subordinate groups.<sup>28)</sup> And these subordinate groups, the producers of what may be called "popular culture," are themselves in constant flux as a result of their engagement with powers above. While this approach is complex and unwieldy, it does permit a more nuanced approach to "top-down" and "bottom-up" histories. In particular, it helps to understand what was taking place in Japan in the 1860s and 1870s: a similitude or confluence in the emergence of the centralized state and attempts by commoners, in rural and urban settings alike, to defend local interests and established traditions of self government.

This paper has examined three episodes of everyday politics pursued by commoners in Japan during the Restoration period. Without attempting to make a general conclusion about the relationship between popular political culture and the process of state formation, I would emphasize both the complexity and the contradictory nature of the relationship. Evidence supporting commoner involvement in wide scale uprisings is not difficult to assemble. Indeed, scholarship on late Tokugawa commoner society has often attempted to link unrest with the Meiji Restoration. Here, however, I have been concerned to highlight what may be called a popular or local political agenda. Popular culture, by its very nature, is contradictory: it embodies the values of the center and at the same time presents alternatives to them. My point is that a process of "localization" — the attempt to defend local interests and enhance local autonomy — can, and often does, parallel the formation of centralized state authority. These local projects are easy to overlook, especially in research concerned with questions of modernization. But other questions, especially those involving everyday practices, help to shed light on whole new universes of political action.

Moreover, these petty everyday encounters are by far the more typical form of commoner political action. Uprisings are exceptions to the rule of less dramatic processes of commoner protest. This paper has presented three episodes of phenomena that can be documented in areas throughout Japan and in times predating the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853 and continuing well after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The continuity of village structures, interests, and practices needs to be emphasized. The "national" process of state formation did not involve the breakdown of "local" society. Villages maintained a life of their own; local loyalties remained strong and able to resist outside intervention. Indeed, the persistence of locally generated agendas throughout the restoration years gives prominence to areas of rural stability in a period usually characterized by momentous change.

The work of James Scott is especially useful in delineating the social consciousness and forms of behavior associated with popular cultures. He stresses *everyday* forms of popular resistance: "the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those

who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them.” Scott’s examination of the “weapons of the weak” challenges the long-standing primacy given to peasant revolts and involvement in revolution. Instead the goal of popular resistance is rarely to overthrow or transform a system of domination, but more often simply to survive. “Persistent attempt to ‘nibble-away’ may backfire, they may marginally alleviate exploitation, they may force a renegotiation of the limits of appropriation, they may change the course of subsequent development, and they may more rarely help bring the system down. These are possible consequences. Their intention, by contrast, is nearly always survival and persistence.”<sup>29)</sup>

In this paper I have tried to show how villagers, through petition, mediation, negotiation and other tactics developed over centuries in dealing effectively with their political and economic superiors, not only succeeded in surviving, but attempted to right perceived wrongs and enhance inherited traditions of local autonomy. They complained and they made their complaints vocal and visible; sometimes they withhold services and refused to pay tax, and sometimes they made threats of property destruction. In Konaka, members of the village elite repeatedly submitted petitions and sought the intercession of anyone who would help them. They refused to be silenced by their superiors. The poorer members of communities in the Kanuma Region made skillful use of collective bargaining techniques, backed them with treats of violence in order to bring about a local version of the revolution taking place in the center. The rural folk in Nasu were quick to take advantage of new legal and judicial systems, but gave in to arguments supporting force when those avenues were blocked. In their everyday grassroots politics, commoners sought the remedy of specific grievances, and often violations to the “moral economy” of individual local communities; people were not behaving as they should. Villagers also rose up in defense of custom or in what was generally assumed to be right. Moreover, the aura of the Restoration years added a shared consciousness of the possibility of change. In Shimotsuke and elsewhere, people began to go beyond the notion of righting wrongs and dream, with some confidence, of bringing about a new order at the village level.

The three episodes above cannot serve as the basis for sweeping generalizations about Japanese rural history and the development of commoner political consciousness. Moreover, it is impossible to deny that many people living in backwards areas of Japan’s countryside suffered from extreme impoverishment and exploitation. Mikiso Hane and others have provided ample evidence of continuities between the Tokugawa era and “modern” Japan as far village Japan is concerned: starvation, infanticide, abortion, and selling daughters into prostitution.<sup>30)</sup> Nonetheless, the episodes above do suggest the possibility of other areas of continuity, in particular between rural politics in the Restoration years and the rapid spread of the “new political ideas” throughout Japan in the late 1870s and into the 1880s. More research is needed, but it may be possible to conceive of men like Shoōzō, Denji, and Sei’emon as pioneers in the spread of new forms of political participation and an explosion of political activity associated with the Freedom and People’s Rights Movement in

## Japan's countryside during the 1880s.

### Notes

- 1) The collected works of Tanaka Shoō have been published: *Tanaka Shoō zenshu*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1977, 21 vols., the first volume of which includes Tanaka's autobiography. Many biographies exist, one of the best and most recent being Yui, Masaomi, *Tanaka Shoō*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1984. In English, see: Kenneth Strong, *Ox Against the Storm-A Biography of Tanaka Shoō: Japan's Conservationist Pioneer*, Tenterden, Kent: Paul Norbury Publications, 1977. See also articles by Fred. G. Notehelfer and Alan Stone in "Symposium: The Ashio Copper Mine Pollution Incident," *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 1. 2 (Spring 1972), pp. 347–407.
- 2) Major sources of documents and information on the Rokkaku Affair include: *Tochigi-ken shi, tsūshi-hen, kinsei* 2, pp. 747–749; documents in *Tochigi-ken shi, shiryō-hen, kinsei* 7, vol. 17, pp. 28, 463–485. *Sano-shi shi, tsūshi-hen*, Sano-shi, 1979, vol. 2, pp. 34–47; documents in *Sano-shi shi, shiryō-hen*, Sano-shi, 1976, vol. 3, pp. 3–4, 11–33. *Kindai Ashikaga-shi, tsūshi-hen*, vol. 1, 1977, pp. 865–877; documents in *Kindai Ashikaga-shi shi, shiryō-hen*, Ashikaga-shi, 1979, vol. 3, pp. 1039–1065. Tanaka Shoō's autobiography devotes much attention to the incident, *Tanaka Shoō zenshu*, vol. 1, pp. 10–48.
- 3) The Shimotsuke fief holdings of the Rokkaku family were distributed over six villages: Konaka (1,001 *koku*), Imafuku (128 *koku*), Suketo (281 *koku*), Tajima (218 *koku*), Yamakawa (405 *koku*), Okubo (296 *koku*), and Ineoka (249 *koku*). In addition, the Rokkaku derived income from two villages in Musashi Province: Kitabukuro (62 *koku*) and Imaizumi (15 *koku*). For details, see: *Kindai Ashikaga-shi shi, tsūshi-hen*, vol. 1, p. 866.
- 4) Anne Walthall, "Caught in the Middle, *Gunchu Sodai* in the Meiji Restoration," *Asian Cultural Studies*, No. 18, 1992, pp. 81–105.
- 5) *Kindai Ashikaga-shi shi, tsūshi-hen*, vol. 1, pp. 868–69.
- 6) Tanaka Shoō's petition is reproduced in his autobiography, *Tanaka Shoō zenshu*, vol. 1, pp. 41–42.
- 7) These charges are similar in tone to the "statement" advanced by three village leaders to their hatamoto master, as reported by Koō Yamamura. The statement, dated 1856, read in part: "Because of your promise to reduce expenditures, we have, during the past years, advanced tax rice and made loans. However, we see no sign of any efforts to achieve necessary reductions in expenditures; 2. Your brother is an immoral idler. As long as such a person is supported by your household, there is little chance of reducing expenditures; 3. You have more than six servants including maids and horsemen. Some should be dismissed." Yamamura comments that the strong language used by the village leaders shows how far the economic position, and thus authority, of the 700-*koku* hatamoto had fallen. On the other hand, it also is a good example of the courage of the villages to "speak out ." See Koō Yamamura, *A Study of Samurai Income and Entrepreneurship*, Harvard University Press, 1974, pp. 47–48.
- 8) See especially Steven Vlastos, *Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, and William Kelley, *Deference and Defiance in Nineteenth-Century Japan*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- 9) *Tochigi-ken shi, tsūshi, kinsei* 2, vol. 5, 1980, p. 1329.
- 10) For a map of the courses these uprisings followed, see *Tochigi-ken shi, tsūshi, kinsei* 2, vol. 5, 1980, p. 1334.
- 11) *Tochigi-ken shi, tsūshi-hen, kinsei* 2, pp. 1355–56; *shiryō-hen*, pp. 323–24.
- 12) For details of rioting around the Utsunomiya area, see *Tochigi-ken shi, tsūshi-hen, kinsei* 2, vol. 5, pp. 1333–1344.
- 13) As the days went by and the size of the mobs increased, so did the size of their demands; see *Tochigi-ken shi, tsūshi-hen, kinsei* 2, p. 1358.
- 14) Kumada, Hajime, "Keio yo-nen no nōmin sōdo," in Ōmachi, Masami and Hasegawa, Shinzō, eds., *Bakumatsu no nōmin ikki*, Tokyo: Yūzankaku, 1974 contains a detailed analysis of the disturbance at Shimo-Nanma village, see pp. 215–231. In the same book, see also the article by Hasegawa, Shinzō, "Keio-ki Noshu sodo," pp. 215–231. Others sources of information and

- documents relating to the Shimo Nanma incident include: *Tochigi-ken shi, tsūshi-hen, kinsei 2*, pp. 1328–1362; documents in *Tochigi-ken shi, shiryō-hen, kinsei 7*, pp. 14–22, 318–345.
- 15) Kumada, pp. 220–221. See also *Tochigi-ken shi, shiryō-hen, kinsei 7*, p. 334.
  - 16) Kumada, p. 222.
  - 17) Kumada, pp. 223–224.
  - 18) Documents relating to these negotiations are included in Kamata, pp. 224–227.
  - 19) The following information is derived from the entry on Shimo Nanma village in *Nihon rekishi chimei taikai*, vol. 9, *Tochigi-ken no chimei*, Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1988, p. 484.
  - 20) Information and documents relating to the Nasu incident can be found in *Tochigi-ken shi, tsūshi-hen, kinsei 2*, pp. 1390–1400; documents in *Tochigi-ken shi, shiryō-hen, kinsei 7*, pp. 538–572. Document 74 (“Hosoho henshin kinen-hi jikki”) is the main source, being a transcription of Itabashi Sei’emon’s account of the incident compiled in 1912, when Sei’emon was 80 years old.
  - 21) *Tochigi-ken shi, shiryō-hen, kinsei 7*, p. 532.
  - 22) *Tochigi-ken shi, shiryō-hen, kinsei 7*, p. 528.
  - 23) *Tochigi-ken shi, shiryō-hen, kinsei 7*, p. 563.
  - 24) *Tochigi-ken shi, shiryō-hen, kinsei 7*, p. 566.
  - 25) See Anne Walthall, “Japanese *Gimin*: Peasant Martyrs in Popular Memory,” *American Historical Review*, 91: 1 (December 1986), pp. 1076–1102.
  - 26) Phillip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution*, Blackwell, revised edition, 1991.
  - 27) Corrigan and Sayer, p. 2.
  - 28) The title of Corrigan and Sayer’s book, *The Great Arch*, is taken from a metaphor used by E. P. Thompson to characterize the centuries-long process of state formation in England, involving the “embourgeoisement of England’s dominant classes (and proletarianization of the ruled, the two being inseparable).” Corrigan and Sayer, p. 11.
  - 29) James Scott, *The Weapons of the Weak*, p. 301.
  - 30) Mikiso Hane, *Peasants, Rebels, and Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.